

RAFFLES-NEW AMATEUR CRACKSMAN SERIES

BY E. W. MORNING

"Well," said Raffles, "what do you make of it?"

I read the advertisement once more before replying. It was in the last column of the Daily Telegraph, and it ran:

TWO THOUSAND POUNDS REWARD.
The above sum may be earned by anyone qualified to undertake delicate mission and prepared to run certain risk. Apply by telegram, Security, London.

"I think," said I, "it's the most extraordinary advertisement that ever got into print."

Raffles smiled.
"Not quite all that, Bunny; still, extraordinary enough, I grant you."

"Look at the figure!"
"It is certainly large."

"And the mission—and the risk!"
"Yes; the combination is frank, to say the least of it. But the really original point is requiring applications by telegram to a telegraphic address! There's something in the fellow who thought of that, and something in his game; with one word he chokes off the million who answer an advertisement every day—when they can raise the stamp. My answer cost me five bob; but then I prepaid another."

"You don't mean to say that you've applied?"

"Rather," said Raffles. "I want two thousand pounds as much as any man."

"Put your own name?"
"Well—no, Bunny, I didn't. In point of fact I smell something interesting and illegal, and you know what a cautious chap I am. I signed myself Glasspool, care of Hickey, 38 Conduit street; that's my tailor, and after sending the wire I went round and told him what to expect. He promised to send the reply along the moment it came. I shouldn't be surprised if that's it!"

And he was gone before a double knock on the outer door had done ringing through the rooms, to return next minute with an open telegram and a face full of news.

"What do you think?" said he. "Security's that fellow Addenbrooke, the police court lawyer, and he wants to see me instantly!"

"Do you know him, then?"
"Merely by repute. I only hope he doesn't know me. He's probably the one man who would have the cheek to put in an advertisement like that, and the one man who could do it without exciting suspicion. It's simply in his line; but you may be sure there's something shady at the bottom of it. The odd thing is that I have long made up my mind to go to Addenbrooke myself if accidents should happen."

"And you're going to him now?"
"This minute," said Raffles, brushing his hat; "and so are you."

Mr. Bennett Addenbrooke occupied substantial offices in Wellington street, Strand, and was out, when we arrived; but he had only just gone "over the way to the court," and five minutes sufficed to produce a brisk, fresh-colored, resolute-looking man, with a very confident, rather festive air, and black eyes that opened wide at the sight of Raffles.

"Mr.—Glasspool?" exclaimed the lawyer.

"My name," said Raffles, with dry effrontery.

"Not up at Lord's, however!" said the other, slyly. "My dear sir, I have seen you take far too many wickets to make any mistake!"

For a single moment Raffles looked venomous; then he shrugged and smiled, and the smile grew into a little cynic chuckle.

"So you have bowled me out in my turn?" said he. "Well, I don't think there's anything to explain. I am harder up than I wished to admit under my own name, that's all, and I want that thousand pounds reward."

"Two thousand," said the solicitor.

"The matter, however, is of a strictly private and confidential character." And he looked very hard at me.

"Quite so," said Raffles. "But there was something about a risk?"

"A certain risk is involved."

"Then surely three heads will be better than two. I said I wanted that thousand pounds; my friend here wants the other. Must you have his name, too? I should give him my real one, Bunny."

Mr. Addenbrooke raised his eyebrows over the card I found for him; then he drummed upon it with his finger nail, and his embarrassment expressed itself in a puzzled smile.

"The fact is, I find myself in a difficulty," he confessed at last. "Yours is the first reply I have received; people who can afford to send long telegrams don't rush to the advertisements in the Daily Telegraph; but, on the other hand, I was not quite prepared to hear from men like yourselves. Candidly, and on consideration, I am not sure that you are the stamp of men for me—men who belong to good clubs! I

rather intended to appeal to the—adventurous classes."

The black eyes gleamed shrewdly. "We are not professional rogues, if that's what you mean," said Raffles, smiling. "But on our beamed we are; we would do a good deal for a thousand pounds apiece, eh, Bunny?"

"Anything," I murmured.

The solicitor rapped his desk. "I'll tell you what I want you to do. You can but refuse. It's illegal, but it's illegality in a good cause; that's the risk, and my client is prepared to pay for it. He will pay for the attempt, in case of failure; the money is as good as yours once you consent to run the risk. My client is Sir Bernard Debenham, of Broom Hall, Essex."

"I know his son," I remarked.

Raffles knew him, too, but said nothing, and his eye droppeded disapproval in my direction. Bennett Addenbrooke turned to me.

"Then," said he, "you have the privilege of knowing one of the most complete young blackguards about town, and the sons et origo of the whole trouble. As you know the son, you may know the father, too, at all events by reputation; and in that case I needn't tell you that he is a very peculiar man. He lives alone in a storehouse of treasures which no eyes but his ever behold. He is said to have the finest collection of pictures in the south of England, though nobody ever sees them to judge; pictures, fiddles, and furniture are his hobby, and he is undoubtedly very eccentric. Nor can one deny that there has been considerable eccentricity in his treatment of his son. For years Sir Bernard paid his debts, and the other day, without the slightest warning, not only refused to do so any more, but absolutely stopped the lad's allowance. Well, I'll tell you what has happened."

The lawyer drew his chair nearer ours, and leaned forward with a hand on either knee.

"On Tuesday of last week I had a telegram from Sir Bernard; I was to go to him at once. I found him waiting for me in the drive; without a word he led me to the picture gallery, which was locked and darkened, drew up a blind, and stood simply pointing to an empty picture frame. It was a long time before I could get a word out of him. Then at last he told me that that frame had contained one of the rarest and most valuable pictures in England—in the world—an original Velasquez. They say at the National Gallery that the picture is practically priceless. And young Debenham has sold it for five thousand pounds!"

"The deuce he has," said Raffles. I inquired who had bought it.

"A Queensland legislator of the name of Craggs—the Hon. John Montagu Craggs, M. L. C., to give him his full title. Not that we knew anything about him on Tuesday last; we didn't even know for certain that young Debenham had stolen the picture. But he had gone down for money on the Monday evening, had been refused, and it was plain enough that he had helped himself in this way; he had threatened revenge, and this was it. Indeed, when I hunted him up in town on the Tuesday night, he confessed as much in the most brazen manner imaginable. But he wouldn't tell me who was the purchaser, and finding out took the rest of the week; but I did find out, and a nice time I've had of it ever since! Backward and forward between Essex and the Metropole, where the Queenslander is staying, sometimes twice a day; threats, offers, prayers, entreaties, not one of them a bit of good!"

"But," said Raffles, "surely it's a clear case? The sale was illegal; you can pay him back his money and force him to give the picture up."

"Exactly; but not without an action and a public scandal, and that my client declines to face. I am to get it back by fair means or foul. He gives me carte blanche in the matter, and, I verily believe, would throw in a blank check if asked. He offered one to the Queenslander, but Craggs simply tore it in two; the one old boy is as much a character as the other, and between the two of them I'm at my wit's end."

"And you wish us to steal this picture?"

It was magnificently said; the lawyer flushed from his hair to his collar.

"I knew you were not the men!" he groaned. "I never thought of men of your stamp! But it's not stealing," he exclaimed heatedly; "it's recovering stolen property. Besides, Sir Bernard will pay him his five thousand as soon as he has the picture; and, you'll see, old Craggs will be just as loth to let it come out as Sir Bernard himself. No, no—it's an enterprise, an adventure, if you like—but not stealing."

"You yourself mentioned the law," murmured Raffles.

"And the risk," I added.

"We pay for that," he said once more.

V-NINE POINTS OF THE LAW

"But not enough," said Raffles, shaking his head. "My good sir, consider what it means to us. Double your stakes, and I for one am your man."

Addenbrooke wavered. "Do you think you could bring it off?"

"We could try."

"And you would really run the risk for four thousand pounds?" Raffles looked at me. I nodded.

"We would," said he, "and blow the odds!"

"It's more than I can ask my client to pay," said Addenbrooke, growing firm.

myself shared his annoyance to no small extent.

That day I saw no more of Raffles, but a telegram reached me when I was dressing for dinner:

"Be in your rooms tomorrow from noon and keep rest of day clear. Raffles."

It had been sent off from Waterloo at 6.42.

His telegram meant that he had no desire for my society that night or the following forenoon; that when he wanted me I should see him soon enough.

And see him I did, toward 1 o'clock next day. I was watching for him from my window in Mount street, when he drove up furiously in a hansom, and

em both. I took the bull by the horns this morning, went in and lied like Ananias, and it was just as well I did—the old ruffian sails for Australia by tomorrow's boat. I told him a man wanted to sell me a copy of the celebrated Infanta Maria Teresa of Velasquez, that I'd been down to the supposed owner of the picture, only to find that he had just sold it to him. You should have seen his face when I told him that! He grinned all round his wicked old head. "Did old Debenham admit the sale?" says he; and when I said he had he chuckled to himself for about five minutes. He was so pleased that he did just what I hoped he would do; he showed me the great picture—



"Worth fifty thousand pounds, my boy, and I got it for five!"

"Then it's more than you can expect to risk."

"Say three thousand if you succeed!"

"Four is our figure, Mr. Addenbrooke."

"Then I think it should be nothing if you fail."

"Doubles or quits?" cried Raffles. "Well, that's sporting. Done!"

Addenbrooke opened his lips, half rose, then sat back in his chair, and looked long and shrewdly at Raffles—never once at me.

"Darn me, I believe you're my very man!" he said.

The bargain was clinched at the Cafe Royal, where Bennett Addenbrooke insisted on playing host at an extravagant luncheon. I remember that he took his whack of champagne with the nervous freedom of a man at high pressure, and have no doubt I kept him in countenance by an equal indulgence; but Raffles, ever an exemplar in such matters, was more abstemious even than his wont, and very poor company to boot. I can see him now, his eyes in his plate thinking—thinking. At the close Raffles apologized for his preoccupation, called for a timetable, and announced his intention of catching the 3.30 to Essex.

"You must excuse me, Mr. Addenbrooke," said he, "but I have my own idea, and for the moment I should much prefer to keep it to myself. But speak to Sir Bernard I must, so will you write me one line to him on your card? Of course, if you wish, you must come down with me and hear what I say; but I really don't see much point in it."

And as usual Raffles had his way, though Bennett Addenbrooke showed some temper when he was gone, and I

jumped out without a word to the man. I met him next minute at the door, and he fairly pushed me back into my rooms.

"Five minutes, Bunny!" he cried. "Not a moment more."

And he tore off his coat before flinging himself into the nearest chair.

"I'm fairly on the rush," he panted; "having the very devil of a time! Not a word till I tell you all I've done. I settled my plan of campaign yesterday at lunch. The first thing was to get in with this man Craggs. Only one sort of pretext would do—it must be something to do with this blessed picture, so that I might see where he's got it and all that. Well, I couldn't go and ask to see it out of curiosity, and I couldn't go as a second representative of the other old chap, and it was thinking how I could go that made me such a bear at lunch. But I saw my way before we got up. If I could only lay hold of a copy of the picture I might ask leave to go and compare it with the original. So down I went to Essex to find out if there was a copy in existence, and was at Broom Hall for one hour and a half yesterday afternoon. There was no copy there, but they must exist, for Sir Bernard himself has allowed a couple to be made since the picture has been in his possession. He hunted up the painters' addresses, and the rest of the evening I spent in hunting the painters themselves; but their work had been done on commission; one copy had gone out of the country, and I'm still on the track of the other."

"Then you haven't seen Craggs yet?"

"Seen him and made friends with him, and if possible he's the funnier old cuss of the two; but you should study

luckily it isn't by any means a large one—also the case he's got it in. It's an iron map case in which he brought over the plans of his land in Brisbane; he wants to know who would suspect it of containing an old master, too? But he's had it fitted with a new lock, and I managed to take an interest in the key while he was gloating over the canvas. I had the wax in the palm of my hand, and I shall make my duplicate this afternoon."

Raffles looked at his watch and jumped up, saying he had given me a minute too much.

"By the way," he added, "you've got to dine with him at the Metropole to-night!"

"Yes; don't look so scared. Both of us are invited—I swore you were dining with me. I accepted for us both; but I shan't be there."

His clear eye was upon me, bright with meaning and with mischief. I implored him to tell me what his meaning was.

"You will dine in his private sitting-room," said Raffles; "it adjoins his bedroom. You must keep him sitting at long as possible, Bunny, and talking all the time!"

In a flash I saw his plan.

"You're going for the picture while we're at dinner?"

"If he hears you!"

"If he does," said Raffles, "there will be a collision, that's all. Revolver would be out of place in the Metropole, but I shall certainly take a life preserver."

"But it's ghastly!" I cried. "To sit and talk to an utter stranger and to know that you're at work in the next room!"

"Two thousand apiece," said Raffles, quietly. He put on his coat and his hat.

"What time have I to be there?" I asked him with a groan.

"Quarter to eight. There will be a telegram from me saying I can't turn up. He's a terror to talk, you'll have no difficulty in keeping the ball rolling; but head him off his picture for all you're worth. If he offers to show it to you, say you must go."

"Where shall I find you when I get away?"

"I shall be down at Essex. I hope to catch the 9.35."

"But surely I can see you again this afternoon?" I cried in a ferment, for his hand was on the door. "I'm not half-coached up yet! I know I shall make a mess of it!"

"Not you," he said again, "but I shall if I waste any more time. I've got a deuce of a lot of rushing about to do yet. Why not come down to Essex yourself by the last train? That's it—I'll tell old Debenham to expect you; he shall give us both a bed. By Jove! he won't be able to do us too well if he's got his picture."

"If," I groaned, as he nodded his adieu; and he left me limp with apprehension, sick with fear, in a perfectly pitiable condition of pure stage fright.

For, after all, I had only to act my part; unless Raffles failed where he never did fail, unless Raffles the neat and noiseless was for once clumsy and inert, all I had to do was indeed to "smile and smile and be a villain."

I practiced that smile half the afternoon. I rehearsed putative parts in hypothetical conversations. I got up stories. I dipped in a book on Queensland at the club. And at last it was 7.45, and I was making my bow to a somewhat elderly man with a small bald head and a retreating brow.

"So you're Mr. Raffles' friend?" said he, overhauling me rather rudely with his light small eyes. "Seen anything of him? Expected him early to show me something, but he's never come."

No more, evidently, had his telegram, and my troubles were beginning early. I said I had not seen Raffles since 1 o'clock, telling the truth with unctious while I could; even as we spoke there came a knock at the door; it was the telegram at last, and, after reading it himself, the Queenslander handed it to me.

"Called out of town!" he grumbled. "Sudden illness of near relative?"

"Well," he continued, "I suppose it can't be helped. Don't know why he couldn't come and have his dinner first. Well, must just dine without him, and he'll have to buy his pig in a poke after all. Suppose you know what he came to see me about? Sorry I shan't see him again for his own sake. I like Raffles—took to him amazingly. He's a cynic. Like cynics. One myself. Rank bad form of his mother or his aunt, and I hope she will go and kick the bucket."

But never shall I forget the private agonies of the situation, the listening to my host with one ear and for Raffles with the other! Once I heard him—though the rooms were not divided by the old-fashioned folding doors, and though the door that did divide them was not only shut, but richly curtained, I could have sworn I heard him once. I spit my wine and laughed at the top of my voice at some coarse sally of my host's. And I heard nothing more, though my ears were on the strain. But later, to my horror, when the waiter had finally withdrawn, Craggs himself sprang up and rushed to his bedroom without a word. I sat like stone till he returned.

"Thought I heard a door go," he said. "Must have been mistaken. * * * imagination * * * gave me quite a turn. Raffles tell you priceless treasure I got in there?"

With the confidential garrulity of a man who has dined too well, he plunged into his darling topic, and I looked past him at the clock. It was only a quarter to ten.

In common decency I could not go yet. So there I sat, and learned what he had originally fired my host's ambition to possess what he was pleased to call a "real, genuine, twin-screw, double-funnelled, copper-bottomed old master."

"But you must see it. Next room. This way," he said.

"Isn't it packed up?" I inquired hastily.

"Lock and key. That's all."

"Pray don't trouble," I urged.

"Trouble be hanged!" said he. "Come along."

And all at once I saw that to resist him further would be to heap suspicion upon myself against the moment of impending discovery. I therefore followed him into his bedroom without further protest, and suffered him first to show me the iron map case which stood in one corner; he took a crafty pride in this receptacle, and I thought he would never cease descending on its innocent appearance and its lock. It seemed an interminable age before the key was in the latter. Then the ward clicked, and my pulse stood still.

"By Jove!" I cried next instant.

The canvas was in its place among the maps!

"Thought it would knock you," said Craggs, drawing it out and unrolling it for my benefit. "Grand thing, ain't it? Worth fifty thousand pounds, my boy—and I got it for five!"

He dug me in the ribs, and seemed in the mood for further confidences. My appearance checked him, and he rubbed his hands.

Heaven knows what I contrived to say at last. Struck speechless first by my relief, I continued silent from a very different cause. A new tangle of emotions tied my tongue. Raffles had failed—Raffles had failed! Could I not succeed? Was it too late? Was there no way?

"So long," he said, taking a last look at the canvas before he rolled it up—"so long till we get to Brisbane."

The flutter I was in as he closed the case!

"For the last time," he went on, as his keys jingled back into his pocket. "It goes straight into the strongroom on board."

For the last time! If I could but send him out to Australia with only its legitimate contents in his precious map case! If I could but succeed where Raffles had failed!

We returned to the other room. Whisky and soda water became the order of the hour. I scarcely touched it, but he drank copiously, and before 11 I left him incoherent. And the last train for Essex was the 11.30 out of Waterloo.

I took a hansom to my rooms. I was back at the hotel in thirteen minutes. I walked upstairs. The corridor was empty; I stood an instant on the sitting-room threshold, heard a snore within, and admitted myself softly with my gentleman's own key, which it had been a very simple matter to take away with me.

Craggs never moved; he was stretched on the sofa fast asleep. But not fast enough for me. I saturated my handkerchief with the chloroform I had brought, and I laid it gently over his mouth. Two or three stertorous breaths, and the man was a log.

I removed the handkerchief; I extracted the keys from his pocket. In less than five minutes I put them back, after winding the picture about my body beneath my Inverness cape. I took some whisky and soda water before I went.

The train was easily caught—so easily that I trembled for ten minutes in my first-class smoking carriage—in terror of every footstep on the platform, in unreasonable terror till the end. Then at last I sat back and lit a cigarette, and the lights of Waterloo reeled out behind me.

To think that I had succeeded where Raffles had failed! Of all our adventures this was the first in which I had played a commanding part; and, of them all, this was infinitely the least discreditable. It left me without a conscientious qualm; I had but robbed a robber, when all was said. And I had done it myself, single-handed—ipse egomet!

I pictured Raffles, his surprise, his delight. He would think a little more of me in future. And that future, it should be different. We had two thousand pounds apiece—surely enough to start afresh as honest men—and all through me!

In a glow I sprang out at Essex, and took the one belated cab that was waiting under the bridge. In a perfect fever I beheld Broom Hall, with the lower story still lit up, and saw the front door open as I climbed the steps.

"Thought it was you," said Raffles cheerily. "It's all right. There's a bed for you. Sir Bernard's sitting up to shake your hand."

His good spirits disappointed me. But I knew the man; he was one of those who wear their brightest smile in the blackest hour. I knew him too well by this time to be deceived.

"I've got it!" I cried in his ear. "I've got it!"

"Got what?" he asked me, stepping back.

"The picture!"

"What?"

"The picture. He showed it to me. You had to go without it; I saw that. So I determined to have it. And here it is."

"Let's see," said Raffles grimly.

I threw off my cape and unrolled the canvas from about my body. While I was doing so an untidy old gentleman made his appearance in the hall, and stood looking on with raised eyebrows.

"Looks pretty fresh for an old master, doesn't she?" said Raffles.

His tone was strange. I could only suppose that he was jealous of my success.

"So Craggs said. I hardly looked at it myself."

"Well, look now—look closely. By Jove, I must have faked her better than I thought!"

"It's a copy!" I cried.

"It's the copy," he answered. "It's the copy I've been tearing all over the country to procure. It's the copy I faked back and forth, so that I could own showing, it imposed upon Craggs, and might have made him happy for life. And you go and rob him of that!"

I could not speak.

"How did you manage it?" inquired Sir Bernard Debenham.

"Have you killed him?" asked Raffles sardonically.

I did not look at him; I turned to Sir Bernard Debenham, and to him I told my story, hoarsely, excitedly, for it was all that I could do to keep from breaking down. But as I spoke I became calmer, and I finished in mere bitterness, with the remark that another time Raffles might tell me what he meant to do.

"Another time!" he cried instantly. "My dear Bunny, you speak as though we were going to turn burglars for a living!"

"I trust you won't," said Sir Bernard, smiling. "For you are certainly two very daring young men. Let us hope our friend from Queensland will do as he said, and not open his map case till he gets back there. He will find my check awaiting him, and I shall be very much surprised if he troubles any of us again."

Raffles and I did not speak till I was in the room which had been prepared for me. Nor was I anxious to do so then. But he followed me and took my hand.

"Bunny," said he, "don't you be hard on a fellow! I was in the deuce of a hurry, and didn't know that I should ever get what I wanted in time, and that's a fact. But it serves me right that you should have gone and undone one of the best things I ever did. As for your handiwork, old chap, you won't mind my saying that I didn't think you had it in you. In the future—"

"Don't talk to me about the future!" I cried. "I hate the whole thing! I'm going to chuck it up!"

"So am I," said Raffles, "when I've made my pile."